

"... ONLY THE VERY BEST CHRISTIAN CLIENTELE"

Discrimination in Hotels and Resorts: U.S.A., 1955

CHARLES ABRAMS

AN OLD rule of the common law is that an innkeeper may not arbitrarily refuse a traveler shelter. If the wayfarer is behaved and willing to pay, he may not be relegated to the manger when there is room at the inn. The rule was originally a product less of Christian ethics than of British convenience. It was extended to include the hostelrys that replaced inns in the burgeoning cities, became part of the common law in America, and was implemented by penal statutes in a number of states. After the Civil War, the provision of the common law was enacted into Federal law but voided by the Supreme Court as an invasion of states' rights.

Subsequently, nineteen states north and west of the Mason-Dixon line enacted legislation providing, generally, for "full and equal" accommodation, regardless of race or religion, in such public places as bath houses, swimming pools, shooting galleries, as well as hotels and resorts. Ten states prohibit discriminatory advertising—Colorado, Illi-

nois, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—but of these New Hampshire and Maine do not forbid discrimination itself. New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Connecticut have state commissions which hear complaints of discrimination of one kind or another and may enjoin the practice by administrative action. And, of course, the common law still serves theoretically as the basis for suit anywhere.

Despite statutes, custom, and common law, discrimination in hotels and resorts of all grades is common today. Negroes are discriminated against in most hotels and resorts. Jews are likely to be barred from many resorts. Discrimination against Chinese, Indians, Japanese, Mexicans, and other minorities is frequent, varying with the place.

Exclusion from hotels means more than an inconvenience or hurt feelings. It can curtail a man's chances to make a living. No matter how competent, a Negro may find it impossible to hold a job that requires extensive travel—discrimination thus helps bar him from, for example, many sales and technological positions for which he is qualified. If his job is important enough to involve attendance at conventions and business conferences, he may be kept out of meeting rooms, banquet halls, and restaurants. And in many places where he is admitted on sufferance, so to speak, his family or associates are not. Such practices continue among the most serious remaining barriers to a leveling of economic and social differences.

The ordinary worker suffers, too. The Negro who moves to a strange city in search of a job must first find a bed. Inability to get temporary shelter may force him to give up,

THAT irritating nuisance, discrimination in hotels and resorts—rare in England and Europe (even in prewar Germany)—still operates in the United States against "undesirable groups," i.e., Jews and Negroes. CHARLES ABRAMS, leading authority on housing, neighborhood living patterns, and civil rights issues, reports on the present state of the problem and gives ground for his conviction that it is something more than an irritating nuisance. Mr. Abrams, one of COMMENTARY's frequent contributors, has just returned from an extended tour of Turkey and the Gold Coast, West Africa, where he headed housing missions for the United Nations. This article is drawn from his forthcoming book, *Forbidden Neighbors*, which will be published by Harper in February. Mr. Abrams has just been appointed New York State Rent Administrator.

whereas the white mechanic will be accepted at almost any hotel he chooses.

THE written rule of hotel practice is to refuse rooms to "undesirables." The unwritten rule includes as undesirables people of the wrong race or color. Refusing a guest is an art. It is simple to say, "There is no room." But a Negro may have a written confirmation of his reservation or he may decide to sit in the lobby and wait for a checkout. The standard practice on paper is:

Front Service Division—When undesirable persons attempt to register, they must not be just refused accommodations, but offered only the highest-priced rooms. If they agree to purchase the room at that rate, they must be given a room that sells regularly at that rate. (National Hotel Management Co., Standard Practice Manual for Hotel Operation, Harper, 1935.)

The Negro who is offered the de luxe suite at \$30 a day is not apt to stay long.

To spare embarrassment to dignitaries from Haiti, Liberia, India, and other nations that do not conform to the American standard of whiteness, the State Department has often provided rooms in Blair House or Lee House, government establishments in Washington. In Boston, a young Haitian lawyer visiting the United States under State Department auspices was evicted from a hotel and forced to pay triple the rates charged whites in a second-rate rooming house. These incidents are common but they break into print only through the clumsiness of a desk clerk followed up by the orneriness of the visitor. President-elect Eisenhower was surprised to hear about them from a Negro delegation in December 1952. Six months later Winston Churchill told the House of Commons he would not change the site of the Bermuda Conference because there was "insufficient evidence" of discrimination against Jews by the Mid-Ocean Club where the conference was to be held.* Undoubtedly,

*The evidence submitted was an acceptance of a reservation from a Vincent O'Connor and a simultaneous rejection of a reservation by a Jacob Goldberg. Discrimination was also charged by The Travel Agents Committee to Combat Discrimination in the Travel Industry. The Com-

their unawareness was a sign of isolation from the realities of discrimination, not unusual among persons who have never been snubbed by a room clerk.

NEW YORK, whose polyglot population has been fusing together for centuries, is one of the nation's most liberal cities. But when the Jehovah's Witnesses held their 1953 convention in New York City, a number of hotels declined to provide rooms because the sect has a sizable proportion of Negroes.

The policy of hotels in the Times Square district has become more liberal since the war, but such liberalism is far from uniform. One manager, a veteran of almost twenty-five years in the business, summarized the situation: "First-class hotels are choosy toward everybody, regardless of race, color, or previous conditions of servitude. They will, however, let in a famous Negro, such as Lena Horne." Third-class hotels will admit a few Negroes, especially if the manager is worried about too many empty rooms. One of these hotels reported three regular Negro tenants: a well-known actor, a night club singer, and a minister. The manager remarked that they were among his best patrons. "They are quiet and they pay their bills on time," he said. "I have never been cheated by a Negro."

The most discriminatory hotels, this manager declared, are those that rank just below the status of the Waldorf and the Pierre. Despite their precautions, they are occasionally caught when a registration has been confirmed and the registrant turns out to be a Negro. He may then be given a room for a single night or offered a costly room. These hotels rarely accept a Negro who appears without a reservation.

One liberal-minded hotelkeeper east of

mittee reported that the Club "has a policy of religious discrimination. It will not accept Jewish guests." The Club explained that its policy is to accept guests who "will be congenial to the members and will themselves be happy during their stay." (Anti-Defamation League release, June 12, 1953, published in New York *Herald Tribune*, June 24, 1953.)

Times Square, catering to an intellectual and literary clientele, once decided to take all comers on the theory that his regular guests were opposed to discrimination or would not care. This was a pioneering move. The new policy soon became generally known and the hotel got increased applications from Negroes. Fearing the effects of a disproportionate balance, the hotel went back to the old policy of limited Negro registration. The fear may well have been groundless and certainly would have been if other hotels also had an open policy. Another Times Square hotel, seeing a business opportunity, now actually encourages Negro registration. Room clerks in other hotels regularly send Negro applicants to it.

ORINARY arithmetic shows that practically speaking there is little reason today for hotel managers to worry about an inundation if they admit Negroes on the same basis as other applicants. Negroes form only a small percentage of the population, and proportionately fewer Negroes than whites can afford the normal rates of good hotels. If only a single hotel in a large city would accept Negro applicants, then there might be risk of many more Negroes choosing the one hostelry that would accommodate them. Today, Negro applicants in Northern cities may choose among as many as a dozen respectable hotels—particularly if they take the trouble to write or wire for reservations in advance.

In any case, there has been a perceptible improvement in recent years, despite the persistence of discriminatory practices. Assisting the process have been test suits, which have prompted hotel owners to give more regard to anti-bias laws and possible lawsuits. Labor unions have also helped to break down discriminatory policies. "The elevator operators are Negroes and they would squawk if we discriminated," one manager frankly explained.

The late A. H. Feller, when counsel to the United Nations, told the writer that the problem of accommodations for colored personnel and delegates had worried the secre-

tariat. But the Waldorf agreed to accept UN guests and dignitaries without considering their complexions, if, in return, the UN promised to favor the Waldorf with its recommendations.

Negroes today fare better when attending conventions as delegates, but, by and large, only when the organizations are predominantly white. The hotels reckon that the presence of a few Negroes is not so damaging as the loss of several hundred reservations. The recent practice of many public-interest organizations in turning down convention cities where hotels discriminate has had a salutary effect.

But a no-discrimination commitment must be arranged well in advance. The National Municipal League scheduled its annual conference in Nashville several years ago and discovered when its members arrived that Negroes could not have rooms. Since then the League has held meetings in San Antonio, Texas, and Richmond, Virginia, without any hotel troubles. The National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials held its 1953 meeting in Washington. A number of its members are Negroes. Four first-class hotels were willing to house the conference and give Negroes both rooms and free use of hotel facilities. The organization chose the Hotel Willard as conference headquarters.

The improvement, however, has been far from uniform. In St. Louis, Walter Gordon, eminent California penal authority, his wife, and other delegates to the convention of the Congress of Correction were denied accommodations by the Statler Hotel because they were Negroes. The Statler manager explained that segregation was the rule at all St. Louis hotels and that the hotel had offered to obtain accommodations for the three Negroes at hotels "catering to members of that race."

New Orleans has made some concessions to South Americans of ambiguous color in order to compete as a port city with Miami. An American Negro professor returning from a trip to South America and stopping off at New Orleans told the writer that when he entered the airport bus for the ride to the

city he was told to sit with the whites—because the driver had overheard him talking in Spanish.

IN RESORT hotels, the problem of discriminatory policies remains, of course, more widespread. This is true, in fact, of "semi-transient accommodations" generally, including the important category of resident hotels in the cities and suburbs.

The prevailing pattern has a long history. The writer was shown a letter dated May 8, 1897, from the proprietor of the Pocono Mountain House, Mount Pocono, Pennsylvania, to a Maryland bride-elect who had inquired about reservations for the honeymoon:

Dear Madam:

Replying to your esteemed favor of the 6th inst., would say we can accommodate you with one good double room to be occupied by two persons from \$10 to \$12.50 per week each person during June. You may also be pleased to learn that we do not cater to the patronage of hebrews. Trusting we may hear from you further, we remain,

Very respectfully yours,
E. E. Hooker

Fifty-seven years later, the Anti-Defamation League reported that Pocono's High Point Inn has mailed to various residents of Pennsylvania cards stating that the hotel caters "to a young Gentile clientele between 20 to 35 years of age."

The groups proscribed today and the rigidity of the restrictions vary. The resort belt from the Adirondacks to Bermuda and Nassau will turn a cold shoulder to Jews in some places and to Negroes and Orientals in most. The devices for keeping out the unwanted may be signs reading "No Jews allowed," "Christians only"—or the desk clerk may politely refuse the visitor accommodation. Most often the tip-off will be given through advertisements reading "Protestant church nearby," "Restricted clientele," "Discriminating clientele," "Our clientele is 100% Christian," "Admission through club membership only." The *Hotel Red Book* a passenger picks up on any train is punctuated with these tips, with the apparent accord of the railroads and the hotel associa-

tions—certainly without any recorded demurrer or protest.

In other cases, letters to applying guests make clear the character of the hotel's regular guests in advance. A resort owner in Falmouth, Massachusetts, for example, wrote: "Our clientele is Gentile and consists mostly of young people." Similar practices are pursued in Ulster and Warren counties, New York. A Wisconsin study in 1947-1948 listed more than a hundred hotels and resorts in that state which explicitly stated their policy on guests, either in brochures or letters. The information conveyed was by the blunt "Gentiles only" or by the more circuitous "Although we hold no prejudices, for the good of all concerned we must adhere as closely as possible to a restricted clientele policy. . . ."

Enactment in 1951 of a Wisconsin law barring the use of such advertising and the activities of a state commission on human rights may have bettered the situation somewhat, but the law is far from eliminating discriminatory practices in that state as yet. A survey made just prior to the law showed 39 out of 79 resorts had a restrictive policy; 14 had a questionable policy; 8 failed to answer; and only 18 indicated no discrimination. Some 6,500 resort and hotel operators were thereafter sent letters explaining the new law, and one member of the commission reported that almost all discriminatory signs and advertising had disappeared.

But some civic groups in Wisconsin report that actual discrimination, as distinguished from openly discriminatory signs and statements, shows little if any decrease. A survey by an American Veterans Committee post showed that five out of six resorts in one area still discriminate on the basis of religion. At the legislative hearings, J. W. Johnson, president of the National Resort Association and the Selected Resort Association, declared: "We do not intend to lose our right to choose our friends, associates, and companions." Other resort owners said that they only follow the prejudices of their guests and that they would lose their patronage if they changed their policy.

In May 1952, Lyle Olson, a resort owner in Somo Lake, Wisconsin, who refused to discriminate, charged that he was visited by a belligerent group of Tomahawk citizens and threatened. "Minority groups ruined the country," he was told. His liquor license, he charged, was revoked on a technicality and his credit with liquor suppliers cut off. At a meeting of resort owners, the president of the Tomahawk Chamber of Commerce was reported as saying: "The Governor's office is 100 per cent behind us [in opposing acceptance of Jewish and Negro guests]. They all believe as we do but they're playing politics and have to keep it under the table." Governor Walter Kohler, Jr., called the statement "ridiculous."

THE chances of a guest with a Jewish name being accepted by a resort chosen from advertisements in the *New York Herald Tribune* are 27 per cent, 48 per cent in the *New York Times*. Persons with non-Jewish names, on the other hand, have about a 90 per cent chance.*

A survey by the Anti-Defamation League revealed 675 hotels in 21 states where prejudice is a matter of public record.† A survey in 1953 of 809 Florida resort hotels and real estate agencies showed that Jewish applicants were acceptable in only 28 per cent. Non-Jews applying for accommodations in the same hotels showed an acceptance rate of 62 per cent; presumably those Gentiles rejected were otherwise undesirable. One hotel wrote that it followed a restrictive policy with regard to "pets, children under 12 years of age, and the Hebrew Religion." Another said, "We have most denominations of churches with the exception of Jewish Synagogues"; a prominent realtor assured his clients that "We do not sell property to Miami Beach elements or their cousins from Brooklyn."

The survey showed that almost every resort center on Florida's east and west coast

has establishments which bar Jews. Fort Lauderdale and Delray Beach are notorious for their discriminatory policies. In Fort Lauderdale, 56 per cent of hotels indicated discrimination against Jews in replies to requests for reservations, while another 4 per cent advertised with such phrases as "near churches." A spot check showed that 73 per cent displayed signs such as "Restricted Clientele" and "Selected Clientele."

Delray Beach openly boasts that it is "the only city in the East Coast fully restricted to Gentiles." Half the replies received in answer to a request by a Jewish applicant contained categorical discriminatory statements, the rest used subtler phraseology.

Even in Miami Beach there are hotels that discriminate against Jews. The American Jewish Committee filed a complaint with the New York State Commission Against Discrimination charging the New York City agents of the Coronado Hotel of Miami Beach with advertising the hotel as being "conveniently located near . . . Catholic and other Christian churches." In its complaint the AJC noted wryly that the Coronado Hotel is as conveniently located for Jewish worshipers as for Protestant: two Jewish synagogues, Congregation Agudath Israel and the North Shore Jewish Center, are in fact closer to the Coronado Hotel than the nearest Protestant church!

There is no discrimination against Jews in northern and central Florida. In St. Petersburg, where discrimination formerly existed, 90 per cent of resorts no longer discriminate, largely as the result of a vigorous anti-discrimination campaign over a long period.

Another Anti-Defamation League survey showed that 40 per cent of resorts in Maine follow a discriminatory policy. A bill to outlaw discrimination was defeated after opposition by hotel owners. When a similar bill was introduced in New Hampshire, the *Concord Monitor* opposed the measure editorially: "Why run the risk of losing a lot of recreation dollars furnished by vacationers who refuse to sleep under the same roof with Jews? It is a matter of business, nothing else, with the proprietors." Counsel for the Maine

*Ruth G. Weintraub, *How Secure These Rights?* (Doubleday, 1949).

†Benjamin Epstein and Arnold Foster, *The Troublemakers* (Doubleday, 1952).

Hotelmen's Association opposed the measure and came to the hearings armed with photo-stats of the *Monitor* editorial. Despite support by other newspapers, the bill was defeated.

IN THE view of the hotel profession, the exclusiveness which has become part of the stock in trade of the resort hotels costs nothing and may enhance prestige. Indicating that a hotel tries not to take Jews constitutes a kind of advertisement to the world of the care with which it selects its clientele. In actual practice, of course, anti-Jewish discrimination means no such thing. The hotel which has a blanket rule barring the "right kind" as well as the "wrong kind" of Jew has no such simple formula for keeping out the "obnoxious" Gentile. And it is significant that policies of exclusion are directed almost always against Negroes and Jews, rarely against any white Gentile group.

One of the principal supports of the segregation policy is the travel and tourist agency. The agencies have instructions from resorts throughout the world and they gear themselves to the biases of each hotel in parceling out accommodations. A memorandum to travel agencies by the Jug End Barn, Inc., in the Berkshires, for example, reads: "We rely on you to 'screen' any prospective guests and to send us only those who will fit in with our high type Gentile following."

When a customer applies to one of the major travel agencies for accommodations, the clerk will size up the applicant, then refer to a code on an index card which tells him what kind of people are accepted at a particular place. He will then suggest the hotel where the customer should go. Some agents have even stopped recommending to their general clientele hotels which cater to Jewish customers, believing they are thus doing their Gentile clients a favor.

THE *technique* of travel agencies in culling applicants for exclusive resorts is illustrated by this letter from the Male Travel Bureau, 274 Madison Avenue, New York, to a traveler with a suspicious name

who had asked in October 1953 for reservations at a Nassau hotel:

Thank you for your letter of October 26 and your deposit of \$50 to cover reservations at Balmoral Club, Nassau.

The text matter in the Balmoral folder is not a routine matter. The hotel is operated on a club basis and all of its members must provide proper references before arrival. While it is true that the acceptance of your deposit will permit you to register, the hotel places the onus on this agency to provide the type of client they will accept.

Before sending your deposit to the hotel, would you kindly send the writer the name of your golf club and its address. Should you not be a member of a golf club, the name of a church group would do. Any good reference will help. Please do not think we are sticky [sic] about this as it is for the protection of all.

Thank you very much for your patronage.

Very truly yours,
Elmer W. Grimes

A few weeks later another person telephoned the same agency and asked for a reservation at the same hotel (\$48 a day for two persons, including breakfast, dinner, and bath). "Will there be any problem about references?" the caller asked. "Not with a name like Crosby," was the reply.

Not all travel agents go along with the policy of exclusion without protest. The American Society of Travel Agents has officially condemned it, and a Travel Agents Committee to Combat Discrimination in the Travel Industry has pledged itself to defeat it. The American Automobile Association has removed discriminatory phraseology from its directory of hotels and resorts. But discrimination is so widespread that many agents say they might have to go out of business if they refused to follow the practice.

Travel agents in the Southwest say 90 per cent of the first-class resorts in Arizona discriminate, 50 per cent in Palm Springs, and 90 per cent in Laguna Beach, California. Cook's had indicated that some 50 per cent of the resorts in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine are restricted. Hotel owners say that if they opened their doors to Jews their Gentile guests would leave and the resort would soon become all Jewish, a fear hardly

based on the facts. The vast majority of predominantly Jewish hotels began as such, in order to accommodate a Jewish clientele. (Jewish hotels themselves, of course, frequently offer no less obvious marks of identification in their advertising, with such phrases as "Dietary Laws Observed." But the intent here is to inform—tests conducted by the American Jewish Committee have shown that such hotels do not turn away Gentile applicants.)

IF THERE is hope that discrimination will ultimately dwindle to insignificance in America, it is because one must believe that in the long view people cannot be made to go on believing what their own experience controverts. The problem is to provide opportunities for such experience, which will demonstrate that prejudice has no foundation in truth. The Ashfords and the Prentisses, exposed to Jewish guests at their summer hotel for the first time, will, in practice, find nothing more objectionable in them than in the Baylors and McBridges and other members of the old crowd. Why should they feel any more challenged by the presence of Jews in a hotel than on an ocean liner? Discriminatory hotels in the United States need to weigh the examples of England and France, where hotels do not discriminate, and seem not to encounter any of the feared problems of our exclusive hotels.

Apologists for discrimination cite the almost solidly Jewish hotels of Miami Beach, the Catskills, and Lakewood, New Jersey, as examples of what would happen if hotels and resorts in other places opened their doors to Jews. The existence of these Jewish vacation centers, established partly because of the closed-door policy, but largely—as noted before—because some Jews prefer Jewish hotels, in fact supplies another argument against the fear that Jewish guests would inundate the non-Jewish resorts. There are literally hundreds of resort areas in the United States. Yet the Jewish demand for resort space adds up to so small a volume compared to the total that only a few areas have been heavily occupied by Jews. And

Miami Beach and the other Jewish vacation centers will surely remain in business even when the Gentile hotels finally open their doors—there is something about the associations (not to speak of the food, desirable marriage partners, and Hadassah fund-raising activities) to maintain their attractiveness for large numbers of Jews.

A number of resort communities still exclude Jews and other minorities. On Fire Island, L. I., one new community used the name "Swejon" ("No Jews" in reverse) to signal its policy. Another, known as Point O' Woods, has a gate at its entrance attended by a uniformed guard who sees to it that none but the few hundred Gentile residents enter. The inhabitants, however, are not barred from the adjoining communities and their services, amenities, and enjoyments, which they partake of freely. These "reservations" with free entry for the elite and a no-trespass sign for the less desirable are becoming a familiar scene throughout the resort belts.

The hotels' exclusion policies have thus taken a toll greater than the frustrations and indignities experienced by transients. A growing by-product is the encouragement of residential segregation. Resort centers have become popular as permanent settlements, and developers have tended to extend the discriminatory patterns of the resorts into the new neighborhoods. "When I first came to Laguna Beach," wrote the publisher of the *South Coast News*, "I soon discovered that the town harbored a considerable sum of racial prejudices, including anti-Semitism. There exists an unwritten law against selling property to Jews. In the case of one of the most prominent subdivisions, it is a written law." Fort Lauderdale and Delray Beach, mentioned above, are two other cases in point, as are those resident hotels whose clientele settle for more than a vacation season.

ALTHOUGH there are laws against discrimination, the problem is not one to be solved purely by enforcement of the statutes. Establishments determined to follow restric-

tive practices develop all kinds of subterfuges.* But one step, at least, in any present effort to improve the situation is to apply the laws, not especially difficult since they are easily enforceable and public opinion on the whole supports enforcement. Public opinion, generally, is likely to be more effective in the long run than legal action alone: there is no question that progress depends as much on a maturing public attitude towards the problem as on passing laws and instituting suits based on them.

When the policies of resort hotels are finally relaxed, a more varied distribution of their guests should take place. There will of

* A popular current device is to set up a resort as a "private club" limiting reservations to "members"; membership is conferred simply on the basis of not being Jewish or Negro. The American Jewish Committee has prepared a memorandum arguing the point that a resort offering *public* accommodations, as determined by certain objective criteria, cannot pretend to be a private club immune to the law. The AJC successfully pressed just such a case before the New York State Committee Against Discrimination involving a Catskill hotel.

course still be those preferring to spend their vacations with their own "kind," whether that be in terms of religion, manners, age, marital prospects, or other common interests. The Miamis and anti-Miamis will continue to flourish without challenge by one to the other. But there are also many people who find homogeneity a bore, whether the guests are Jews only, Catholics only, or Quakers only. Those who are limited at home in the range of their acquaintances are by no means unanimous in their desire to make their vacation diet more of the same. Heterogeneity, not homogeneity, is what makes cities like New York and Paris fascinating.

But be that as it may, there seems little justification for the persistence of practices which, at least as far as public accommodations are concerned, violate the law, and fly in the face of that hospitable spirit which was a hallmark of America's earlier days and toward which, in this past decade of increasing consideration for the rights of all "minorities," we have been trying to find our way back.